TIG FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

Grantee name: Montana Legal Services Association **TIG grant number:** 02694
Submission date: January 25, 2006

Prepared by: Katherine Bladow **Phone number:** (406) 442-9830 x23
Contact person: Alison Paul **Phone number:** (406) 442-9830 x15
Email address: apaul@mtlsa.org

## I.   Project Goals

The Montana Legal Services Association ("MLSA") was awarded a Legal Services Corporation Technology Initiative Grant ("LSC TIG") to implement a centralized case management system. This system was expected to expand MLSA's capacity to serve clients by allowing staff to (1) manage cases in a more efficient and unified manner, (2) improve efficiency of data reporting, (3) improve communications and increase staff connectivity, and (4) increase pro bono participation.

Unfortunately, due to a significant change made by the State Bar of Montana in the Equal Justice Coordinator's role regarding pro bono support and program development, MLSA was able to accomplish only three of the four goals. With the State Bar of Montana's new approach to encouraging pro bono participation, the pro bono aspect of this project became obsolete and was eliminated.

II.   Major Accomplishments

MLSA's greatest accomplishment was implementing the centralized case management system. In 2002 when MLSA requested the LSC TIG funding to centralize the case management system, the program was using twelve databases that were connected by floppy disks and the USPS. (See Diagram 1 for MLSA's pre-centralization network design.) The data was backed up sporadically. Computer hardware and software needed replacing, and intra- and inter-office networks were underdeveloped. Most offices did not have broadband Internet. Before a centralized case management system could be implemented effectively, all of these problems needed to be addressed.
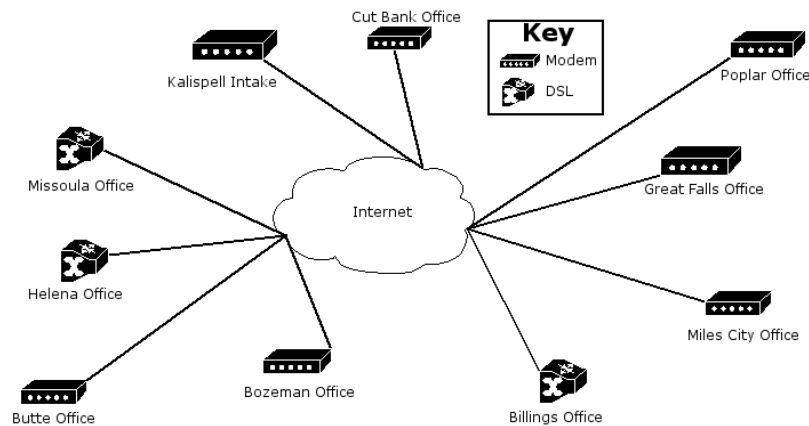
Diagram 1: MLSA's Network Topology 3-2003[1]

---

[1] All offices connect directly to the Internet.

After six months of planning, comparing costs, and researching software, MLSA opted to hire a 0.75 FTE IT Projects Manager/System Administrator to manage MLSA's IT needs and centralize the case management system instead of its previous plan to use consultants for the conversion. Within seven months, twelve Clients for Windows 98.1 Access databases were consolidated into one PRIME SQL database. In the process, the network design was improved, most offices were upgraded to broadband Internet, hardware and software were replaced, and a back up system was implemented. (See Diagram 2 for MLSA's post-centralization network design.) Data and network security concerns were also analyzed and addressed. This was done for significantly less cost than if MLSA had hired a consultant.
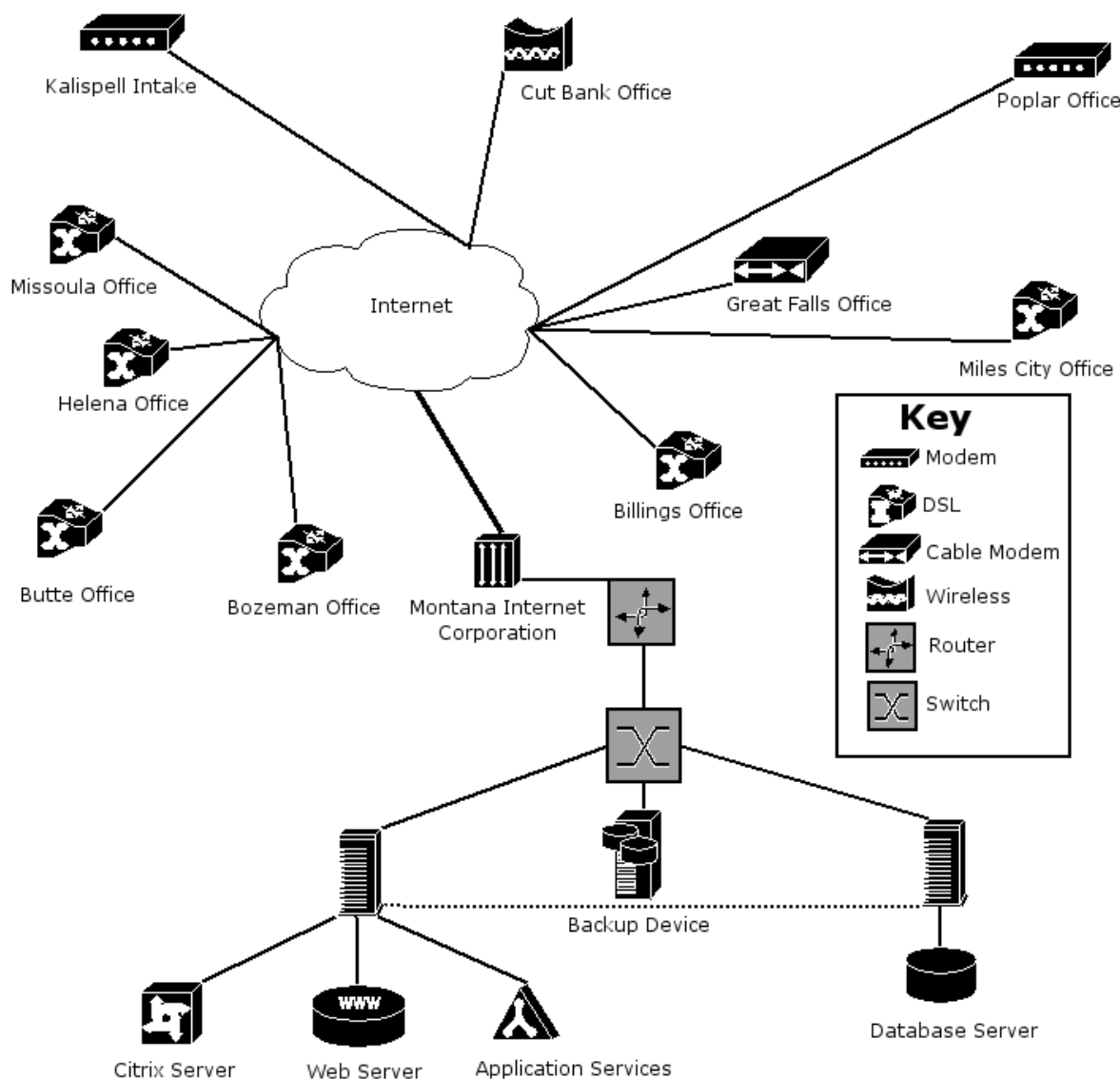
Diagram 2: MLSA's Network Topology 10-2003[2]

During the implementation of the program's centralized case management system, MLSA also experienced three unanticipated outcomes.

---

[2] All offices connect directly to the Internet.

(1) MLSA staff gained extensive knowledge of PRIME. The IT Projects Manager/System Administrator has provided guidance to five other legal aid programs and has assisted in the conversion of two of those programs' case management systems. It is estimated that these two programs together saved $5,700.00 because of the IT Projects Manager/System Administrator's assistance. Additionally, MLSA's Administrative Officer developed training materials and manuals for use with PRIME that have been modified and used by other programs. These materials have been posted in the LSC Resource Initiative Library.

(2) The IT Projects Manager/System Administrator implemented additional technology projects and provided technical support for staff. These projects, including a program-wide e-mail system and an internal, secure instant messaging system, complemented the centralized case management system and contributed to the goal of improving communications and increasing staff connectivity.

(3) MLSA recognized the need for full-time, in-house technical support. After completing the centralized case management system project, MLSA increased the level of funding for the IT Projects Manager/System Administrator to 1.0 FTE. MLSA has sustained this position beyond the initial TIG funding and now considers it a core support position.

III.   Factors Affecting Project Accomplishments

Multiple factors affected MLSA's accomplishments, including the geographic size of Montana, staff attitudes, software limitations, and the availability of technology resources.

Geographic Size of Montana
At 147,046 square miles, Montana is the fourth largest state in the nation, ranking just below California. It takes nearly thirteen hours to drive from the northwestern corner of the state to the southeastern corner, and from east to west, Montana is slightly longer than the distance from Washington, DC to Chicago, IL.
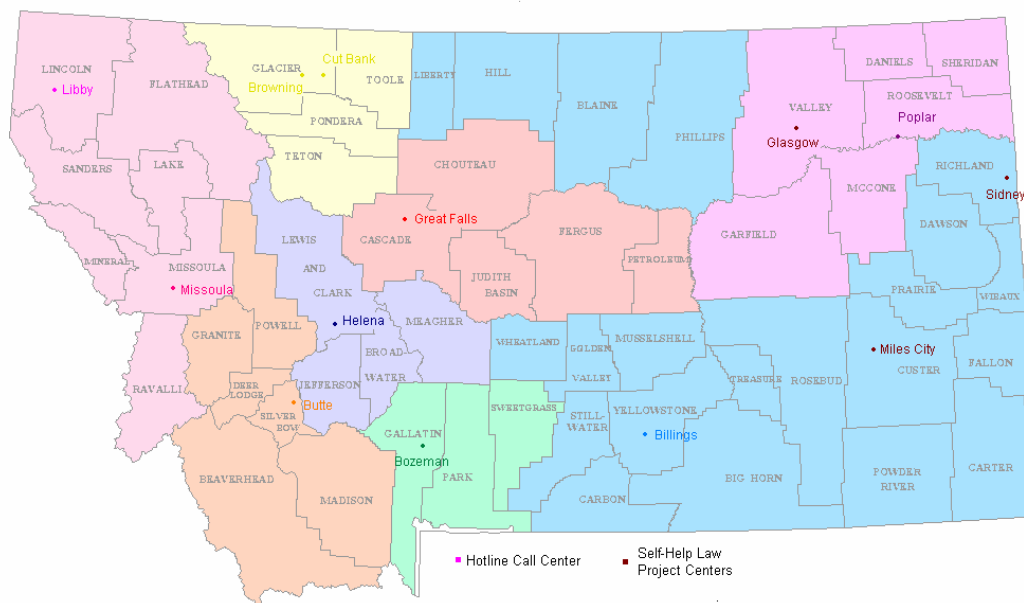
MLSA Offices, Self-Help Centers, and Service Areas

In order to provide legal assistance in Montana, MLSA has had to locate offices some distance from each other. While this is best for clients, the distance adds expense and time when deploying program-wide changes. This was especially true for the implementation of the centralized case management system. To limit costs, the IT Projects Manager/System Administrator did most of the work from the Helena office. When he needed to travel, he tried to accomplish multiple projects in one trip, such as network improvements, software upgrades, and resolution of other minor technical issues.

The distance between offices also affected the launch of the centralized case management system. Due to the number of changes and apprehension among some of the staff, it was decided that a program-wide, in-person training event was necessary prior to launching the new system. Because of the expense and complexity of coordinating an all-staff training event, this training had to happen at the pre-arranged, MLSA Annual Training in October 2003. This determined the launch date and meant that the centralized case management system implementation had to be completed within seven months.

Staff Attitude
Most legal aid programs have technology skeptics, and MLSA is no exception. While most staff were excited about the centralized case management system offerings, some staff members were reluctant to accept the changes and resentful of the expense. MLSA management addressed these issues by listening to concerns, explaining the changes, and detailing the project's progress. Typically, once software and hardware were replaced and upgraded, and the IT Projects Manager/System Administrator addressed each office's long-standing technical issues (fixing broken printers, providing software tips, creating needed case management reports, etc.), the concerns diminished dramatically, and most concerns disappeared completely.

Staff attitude was also a positive factor in MLSA's centralized case management system project. Most staff were willing to help with testing, an extremely necessary step in the project. On multiple occasions, offices participated in load testing of the software and server. There were few complaints, and most staff enjoyed being part of the process and getting a preview of the new software.

Software Limitations
As one of the first programs to use the PRIME version of Kemp's case management system, MLSA's IT Projects Manager/System Administrator helped with the final testing on and improvements to the PRIME system. This unexpected step added additional time to MLSA's project.

Availability of Technology Resources
Because of Montana's population size, technology resources, such as high-speed Internet, are frequently limited, if not unavailable. With the centralized case management system, MLSA experienced these limitations firsthand. In most locations, MLSA had only one or two high-speed Internet options to choose from. In one area, MLSA had only one option, a wireless Internet provider. Overall, this was a good option; however, it has been a drawback for the Cut Bank office. Cut Bank is known as the coldest spot in Montana. On

the coldest of days (about -10˚ F), the wireless WAN stops functioning and leaves the Cut Bank office without an Internet connection. This is not ideal, and unfortunately, because it was the only option, MLSA is locked into a multi-year contract and cannot switch even though other options now exist.

In another area, high-speed Internet was unavailable. This meant that a hotline worker had to connect to the centralized case management system using a dial-up Internet connection, which was painfully slow. Later, a satellite Internet provider offered services in that area. The hotline worker rated the change as an extraordinary improvement and does not have problems similar to those in the Cut Bank area.

IV.   Strategies to Address Major Challenges

MLSA employed strategies that must be used in every technology project to achieve success.

(1) The IT Projects Manager/System Administrator and management were flexible and open to testing alternative options, such as satellite Internet or an open source software solution.

(2) Management and staff had patience when waiting for new software, made do until a better solution was available, and gave the IT Projects Manager/System Administrator time to find solutions to problems.

(3) MLSA invested significant amounts of time in developing trainings and resource materials for staff. MLSA's Administrative Officer also spent significant time training staff and answering questions.

MLSA's cost-effective strategy of hiring a 0.75 FTE was also an extremely effective way of addressing software and technology resource limitations. As someone that had a stake in seeing MLSA benefit from the implementation, the IT Projects Manager/System Administrator spent countless hours comparing Internet Service Providers, upgrading networks, software, and hardware, and answering staff questions to see that the project succeeded. For MLSA to have received similar service from a consultant would have been extremely expensive. One staff member recognized this, saying "Having [the IT Projects Manager/System Administrator] as our DB Administrator has been a valuable asset to MLSA. Being able to call him anytime, any day to ask questions, solve PRIME problems has made all of the difference."

V.   Assessment of System or Approach Developed through the Project

MLSA was able to meet three of the four goals originally established for the centralized case management system project: (1) manage cases in a more efficient and unified manner, (2) improve the efficiency of data reporting, and (3) improve communications and increase staff connectivity.
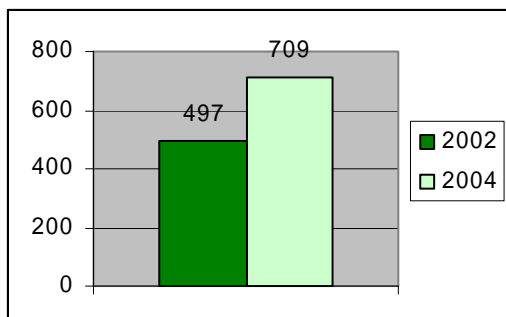
Cases are managed more efficiently and uniformly.

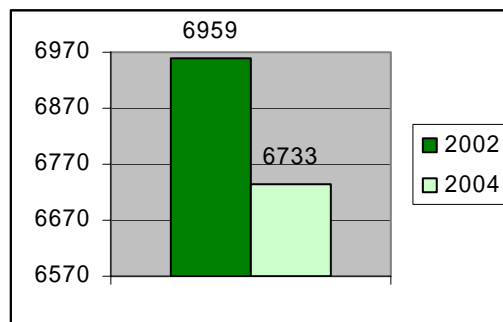The transition to a centralized case management system significantly improved the efficiency of MLSA's case management. Although MLSA experienced a considerable loss of staff due to a loss of funding, the program still was able to report a substantial increase in the number of low-income persons served based on the available staff resources.[3] Between 2002 and 2004[4], MLSA lost 9.5 FTE case handlers, including 4.5 intake workers. As expected, MLSA suffered a decline in the

Comparison of All Intakes

number of new intakes in 2004; however, the 3 percent decrease in new intakes did not replicate the 32 percent reduction in intake staff. In fact, in 2004 MLSA saw a 43 percent

**Ratio of All Intakes to
the Number of Intake Staff**

increase in the number of intakes handled per intake worker. If, in 2004, MLSA had the fourteen intake workers available in 2002, the program could have processed approximately 9,900 intakes, one of the largest numbers of intakes processed in one year in MLSA's thirty-year history.

While MLSA saw a slight decrease in the overall number of intakes, MLSA saw a 5 percent increase in the number of accepted intakes and a 20 percent decrease in the number of rejected intakes when comparing 2004 with 2002. Each intake worker processed 515 accepted intakes in 2004 in direct contrast with the 333 accepted intakes processed in 2002. These numbers denote a 55 percent increase in the number of accepted cases processed by each intake worker.

The increase in service delivery attributed to the centralized case management system affected not only intake but also increased MLSA's overall service delivery. After reducing the number of case handlers by 28 percent between 2002 and 2004, MLSA experienced only a 1 percent decrease in closed cases in 2004. Additionally, each case handler closed 195 cases on average, which represents a 38 percent increase in cases closed per case handler when compared with 2002.

In addition to increasing efficiency, the centralized case management system also allows MLSA to manage cases more uniformly. The most remarkable change that the new case management system allowed was consistent conflict checking. Prior to the centralized

---

[3]Although MLSA experienced additional programmatic changes that may have attributed to this increase, management believes that the centralized case management system, including the additional training provided during the transition, was a significant cause for the increase.

[4] Numbers from 2003 were not used in this evaluation because staff used both the centralized and non-centralized case management systems during that year.

case management system, intake workers would check all legal aid applicants for conflicts within the office's service area but would only consistently check for a conflict outside of the service area if the applicant provided information that the applicant or adverse party lived in another location. To check for a conflict for the entire state, the intake worker called the Helena office and asked a Helena intake worker to perform a conflict check in the Helena case management system. While the Helena system contained the most recent compilation of all case records, the system could have been missing up to five days worth of records from other offices. With the advent of the centralized case management system, intake workers can check the statewide system for existing conflicts for all applicants immediately.

Other new processes have developed due to the implementation of the centralized case management system. Particularly, MLSA has progressed from location-based case staffing meetings to multi-office case staffing meetings. This change provided remarkable opportunities for MLSA's Hotline Unit and Domestic Violence Units. The Hotline Unit has five staff members that work for three different locations. According to the Hotline Manager, being able to access case records and intake information on a statewide basis is invaluable. He claims that it would be impossible for him to run a hotline without the statewide access. The centralized case management system allows him to quickly review intakes and assign them on a first-come, first-serve basis instead of on the location of the caller. It also allows him to hire and retain staff based on work product and knowledge instead of location.

The transformation for the Domestic Violence Unit has been similar. The Domestic Violence Unit has eight staff members who work from four different locations to provide legal assistance statewide to domestic violence victims. By combining MLSA's Video Conferencing Project and the centralized case management system, the Domestic Violence Unit has been able to serve domestic violence survivors based on the level of impact that legal assistance can have instead of the client's location. Staffing cases as a unit instead of as an office allows the Domestic Violence Unit to identify larger issues affecting domestic violence survivors and to share legal knowledge with other members of the Domestic Violence Unit.

One contributing factor to the substantial improvements in efficiency and uniformity of case management is the high level of satisfaction that non-technical staff have experienced from the beginning with the PRIME case management system. Seventy percent of staff rated the centralized case management system as good or very good for its overall efficiency and usability in processing intakes. Staff members were also quite happy with other features of the case management system with 79 percent or more of staff rating timekeeping, reporting, finding client information, and referring cases to pro bono attorneys as good or very good. The only area that was rated substantially lower was conflict checking where only 52 percent of staff rated the feature as good or very good.[5]
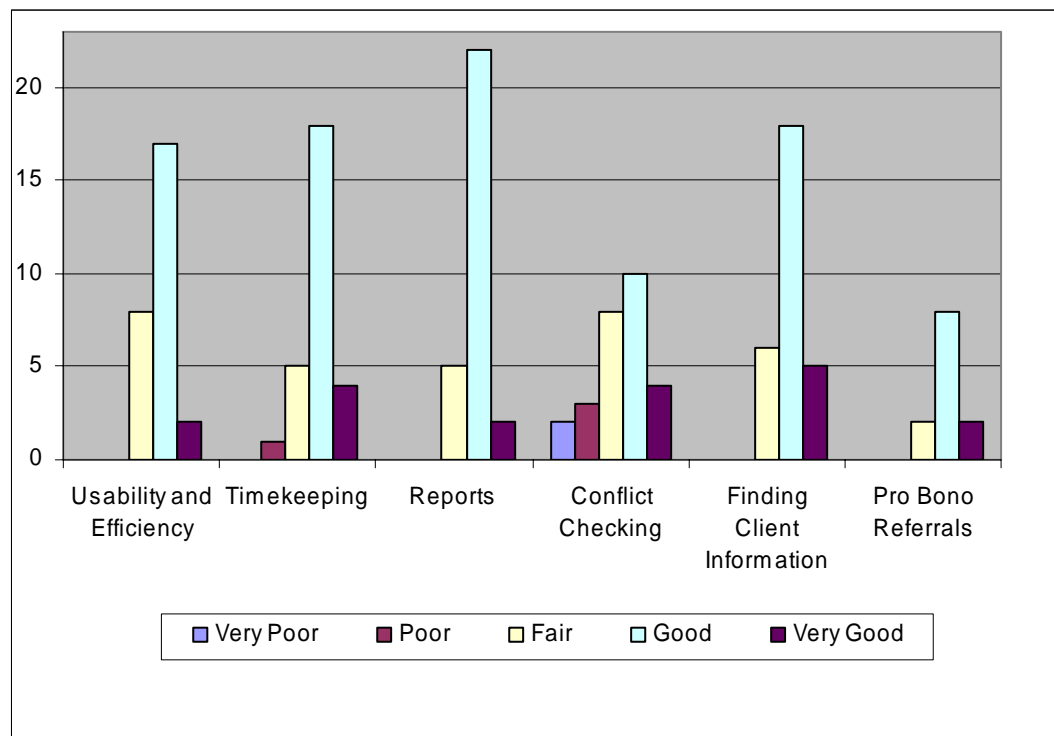
Staff Assessment of Centralized Case Management System

Management believes that this satisfaction stemmed from upgrading to a new version instead of transitioning to a new case management system and shows that management met one of its primary goals for the case management conversion: avoiding an interruption in service and making the shift to a new case management system appear seamless. Management accepts that this nearly seamless transition also increased the efficiency and uniformity of case management. Since staff members were familiar with most basic procedures and tasks they were able to focus on mastering more difficult functions. Conquering advanced features allowed staff to perform tasks more efficiently.

---

[5] During implementation, the IT Projects Manager/System Administrator recognized the limitations of the conflict checking feature and later resolved the issue; however, the problem wasn't fixed until after staff had completed their evaluation of the case management system.

Technical staff were not as satisfied with the PRIME version of Kemp's case management system. To convert the data between the Clients for Windows 98.1 Access databases and the PRIME SQL database required the technical staff to have more expertise than would typically be required for upgrading to a new software version. Additional upgrades that occurred after the completion of the grant were also time-consuming.

Data analysis and reporting is more efficient.
Anecdotal evidence suggests that the new centralized case management system has significantly improved data analysis and reporting. MLSA's Administrative Officer states that the centralized case management system has improved the efficiency of reporting data. Particularly, the centralized case management system has allowed her to assure that the integrity of the data remains high. Problems become evident more quickly, and she can easily correct problems. Previously, the Administrative Officer had to involve multiple staff members to correct data errors, but now she is often able to correct records without involving any other staff members. She also sees less duplication of case records because the immediate access that staff have to all entered records.

The Administrative Officer saw a substantial reduction in the time it takes her to complete the LSC-required Case Disclosure Report. Before 2004, the Case Disclosure Report typically took her an entire day to complete. For the Case Disclosure Report due for 2004, completing the report took approximately an hour. She has seen similar increases in efficiency for the other reports that she completes and expects to see an even greater increase in efficiency as she becomes more familiar with the new case management system.

Communications and connectivity between staff has been improved.
With the implementation of the centralized case management system and the development of statewide case staffing meetings, communication between staff members has greatly improved. As expected, the Administrative Officer and the IT Project Manager/Systems Administrator speak with staff outside of the Administrative Office more frequently. They answer questions regarding program procedures, provide training on the case management system, discuss potential software bugs, and resolve other technical issues. Staff members have become more comfortable asking for help and, because of the instant messaging and e-mail improvements, do so in a timely manner.

There were also several unexpected improvements to staff communication. As mentioned above, the Domestic Violence Unit is using the unit-wide case staffing meetings to share legal expertise between experienced and new staff members, improving the quality of services that MLSA is able to provide to clients. The Hotline Unit is also communicating more with other case handlers at other offices because of the intake referral process to and from local offices.

VI.   Major Lessons and Recommendations

Based on the results of implementing the centralized case management system, MLSA can make several recommendations for other organizations contemplating launching a similar project.

Analyze and Research

Prior to initiating the centralized case management system project, MLSA carefully analyzed the existing infrastructure and available resources and researched options for staffing the project, software, and training staff. By knowing what resources and options were available, management was able to make informed decisions. They were aware of the potential positive and negative outcomes and could plan timelines and budgets accordingly.

Be Open and Flexible

Through the project, management and staff were open and flexible. When problems arose, they looked for alternative, acceptable solutions. Frequently, these solutions were more cost-effective in the long-run, such as hiring the IT Projects Manager/System Administrator. Had management and staff not been open to alternatives, these opportunities may have been missed.

Balance User Need and Long-Term Cost

MLSA staff are typical of the staff at most legal aid programs – dedicated to clients and advocacy. MLSA staff, understandably, see time they spending struggling with technology or attending technology training as time that they aren't serving clients. For management it was extremely important to select an easy-to-use case management system that wouldn't frustrate staff and wouldn't require a significant amount of training. For other programs without the commitment of management to full-time technical support, similar concerns may need to be balanced with continuing system administration needs and the potential associated cost burdens.